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Panel of Nine Delft Tiles with Ottoman Figures

The Netherlands, Late 19th century

Tin-glazed earthenware

45.5cm high, 45cm wide. Each tile approx 15.0 x 14.8cm.

Stock no.: A5689

A selection of nine Delft tiles featuring hand-painted figures copied from illustrations in *De schipvaert ende reysen gedaen int landt van Turckyen*, Willem Silvius' 1577 Dutch translation of Nicolas de Nicolay's 1568 *Les Quatre premiers livres des navigations et pérégrinations orientales*. Nicolas de Nicolay, royal geographer and allegedly a spy for the French crown, embarked on a diplomatic voyage to Istanbul.¹ He chronicled the journey in *Les quatre premiers livres*, recording the costumes and customs of the Ottoman world. The engravings were by Louis Danet based on de Nicolay's *in situ* sketches.² Although the exotic elements were often heightened, the illustrations and accompanying text provided some of the first descriptions of people from the Islamic world to reach the West, becoming the basis of ethnographic studies for the next two centuries.³ These tiles depict Ottoman citizens of all classes, ethnicities, and professions.

From left to right, top to bottom, they depict:

1: A woman from the Sultan's court

2: Young woman from Paros, an island in the Archipelago

3: An Emir, descendant of Mohamed.

4: Solachi or Solacler, ordinary archer of the guard of the Great Turk (the Sultan)

5: An Agha, or Captain General of the Janissaries

6: A young Greek girl from the city of Gera (Lesbos)

7: A middle-class Turkish woman in domestic costume

8: A woman from the island of Chios

9: A Persian woman

Though they feature three women from the Greek islands of Gera, Chios and Lesbos, the Aegean islands came under Ottoman rule in the 16th century. The central figure is an Agha, or Captain of the janissaries, the group in which de Nicolay was most interested. The book had four depictions of janissaries, with the captain the highest ranking. Janissaries were recruited by the *devşirme* system, whereby boys from the Christian Balkan lands conquered by the Ottomans were kidnapped and forcibly recruited as soldiers. They dressed in large turbans with a jewelled pendant in order to emulate the Sultan.

Between 1880 and 1900, the tile factory of Ravesteijn in Utrecht produced two series of tiles depicting animals and Ottoman subjects for export to Britain. The six-inch square shape made them ideal for use in fireplace surrounds. Though records of the manufacture of these tiles do not survive in Ravesteijn catalogues, stencils with these designs have been preserved.⁴ British interest in blue and white tiles grew in the late 19th century due to the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement. The fireplace of Red House, the home of the designer William Morris, was decorated with Delft tiles.⁵

¹ Keller, Marcus. 'Nicolas de Nicolay's Navigations and the Domestic Politics of Travel Writing', *L'esprit créateur* 48.1 (2008). pp. 18-31.

² Brafman, David. 'Facing East: The Western View of Islam in Nicolas de Nicolay's Travels in Turkey', *Getty Research Journal* 1 (2009). pp. 153-160, 153.

³ *Ibid.* 153

⁴ Van Lemmen, Hans. 'Six-inch Ravesteijn tiles depicting animals and Turkish men and women', *Tegel* 25 (1997). pp. 34-39.

⁵ 'Delftware: tin-glazed earthenware tiles', *Victoria & Albert Museum*, retrieved online via <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/delftware-tiles>.